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SPEECHES AND WRITINGS

Review of B Pash's book The Alsos Mission
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THE ALSOS MISSION. By *Colonel Boris T. Pash.*

Col. B.T. Pash, Ret., 1969, 256 pp., \$6.95.)

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A secret message from Henry L. Stimson, Secretary of War, to General Dwight D. Eisenhower on 11 May 1944 introduced the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe to a most unusual task force with a very unusual mission. This force with the code name "Alsos," a conglomerate group of very select military men and scientists, was destined to be involved in one of the most critical intelligence missions in World War II. This book, written by the military leader of the task force, Colonel Boris T. Pash, presents an authoritative account of this "highest priority" mission.

Perhaps it would have been appropriate to have had a prefatory description of the author, Colonel Pash. Some readers, especially those of the new generation viewing World War II with historical interest rather than that growing out of personal memories or experience, might misinterpret the actions here described, as fictionalized. Who would take the personal risks that Pash describes, and what career Army officer would continually circumvent military bureaucracy and "buck the system" as he did? Knowing the Colonel personally as I have through the years, and as a result possibly being subjective in my analysis, I nevertheless know that his account, albeit not documented historically, is true and accurate in every sense. Pash was one of those unique individuals who seems to emerge from nowhere at the right time in history to do the impossible.

The life story of this native born San Franciscan contains many chapters worthy of separate study. He was in Russia in World War I, and during the Bolshevik coup he joined the anti-Communist forces as a representative of his father, a Russian Orthodox bishop in the United States. His losing cause was not without some benefit, however. He returned with a beautiful blonde Russian aristocrat bride, Lydia. It was an amusing, sentimental, romantic, and yet interesting insight into his character and personality in how he wooed and won his bride. Aristocratic Russians of that day were unapproachable—and young officers of elite regiments made this more difficult. Social status was important and the beautiful Lydia would not initially even acknowledge the existence of this "fresh" young American. He had learned however through his own informant that the 18 year old beauty loved little kittens. He scoured the Ukrainian countryside until he found a small three-week old white kitten

which he called "Puss" and which he used as his introduction to Lydia. Puss became the sentimental nickname of his young bride and a name which has stuck to the present day. This incident, although amusing, does give an insight into his "devious" character. It probably also served to acquaint him with the necessity and importance of good intelligence early in life. This sentimental side of his nature one would learn only by close association with him such as his "Alsos" boys had. In some circles, however, he is looked upon as an ogre.

A Soviet review of a book written by Pash's scientific counterpart in Alsos, Dr. Samuel A. Goudsmit, pictured Pash as personifying "the chains of the most merciless machinery of coercion—the apparatus of military security." He was looked upon by the Soviets as "serving reactionary American politicians" and even as indirectly being negligently responsible for President Kennedy's assassination. Some liberals have also viewed the Alsos commander as an evil instrument of the military-industrial complex because of the active part he had played in uncovering information that resulted in the removal of Robert Oppenheimer as a potential security risk. Pash has the dubious distinction of being a character in a Broadway play that was sympathetic to Oppenheimer—a play which had a successful road run in the major cities in the West appealing primarily to the pseudointellectual liberal. I myself reviewed the play in Munich and in it the Alsos Colonel whom I knew as a completely dedicated patriotic American was pictured as a sort of neo-Nazi arch-villain, a part of a major conspiracy bent on bringing about suppression of factual scientific objectivity in the United States. This description of Pash as being cunning and shrewd is not without some element of truth, however his motives in being so were always based on patriotism and an almost fanatical determination to accomplish his mission.

Pash describes the Alsos mission from its beginning in the fall of 1943 to its culmination in the hectic days after the Nazi surrender. It involved a dedicated group of intelligence agents, scientists, and military personnel bent on determining the extent of the development of super-weapons by Nazi Germany, and to prevent any of it from falling into the hands of the advancing Soviets.

Adolf Hitler had been promising his people new super-weapons, and the Allies, who were themselves close to success in the development of the A-bomb, feared the worst—that the Nazis would have the bomb first. The Nazis themselves felt that they were ahead in the race. If this were the case, the war would be lost, regardless of a great superiority by the Allies in men and material. Another threat of similar order, was the possibility that the advancing Soviet armies might capture these weapons and the people involved in its research. The success of Alsos was thus of paramount importance.

Alsos had its conception in the fall of 1943 and its mission had been

assigned to the Army, specifically to Major General Leslie R. Groves, head of the United States Atomic Project. The Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and British Intelligence had been unable to come up with the needed information. General Groves and Major General George V. Strong, Chief of Army Intelligence agreed that a special military-scientific unit should be formed. Colonel Pash, who had been working closely with General Groves on a Soviet espionage case, was chosen as the task force military commander. The code name for the mission, as in most cryptonyms, had no special significance and the origin was unknown to author Pash. "Alsos," however, is the Greek word for grove (trees), and its selection may well reflect the hand of some university scholar in the bowels of the Pentagon where such names were dreamed up. It could possibly have been named after the General himself (Groves).

Pash and Groves worked well together. Pash, although a military man, had no love for army bureaucracy. Indeed, if he had allowed himself to be tied down in its quagmire of rules and regulations, he would probably never have accomplished his mission. Groves himself, as Pash described him, "never tolerated the staff gobbledygook and beating around the bush of which there was so much in Washington." Alsos just could not have functioned under such a system. Chosen for the chief scientist of Alsos was Dr. Samuel A. Goudsmit, who had been personally recommended by Dr. Vannevar Bush, director of the Army Office of Scientific Research and Development (OSRD). This combination, Pash, the military intelligence specialist, and Goudsmit, the brilliant scientist,¹ exemplified the compatibility of these diverse disciplines in the pursuit of scientific targets.

Pash and Goudsmit after sizing each other up found that they could work well together. Pash, who placed great value in a complete rapport among all people in the mission because of its special values, felt an instinctive trust and admiration of his scientific counterpart. "Despite the facade of intellectual aloofness so typical of many of our scientists of those days, my partner exhibited live human traits," Pash remarks. The two soon drew up a plan of operation. Briefly it was threefold.

1. The scientific section was to decide on targets, whether personnel, installations, or equipment.
2. Pash would seize those targets and protect them from destruction.
3. When the area was safe for non-combatants, the scientists in whose professional fields the targets fell would be brought up to conduct the necessary investigation.

¹Chairman, Department of Physics, Brookhaven National Laboratory.

Although this plan was the general guide to the function of the mission, events later proved this was not always feasible. Pash and his Alsos mission often found themselves intentionally and unintentionally, much to the consternation of our top military leaders and some of our allies, far ahead of our front line combat troops.

Before the assignment of Goudsmit, Alsos had been assigned to a mission in Italy with Dr. James Fisk of the Bell Telephone Company as chief scientist. It also included Dr. John Johnson of Cornell University, Commander Bruce Olds and Major William Allis of MIT. Fish and Pash were the only ones briefed on the atomic bomb project. This interest, however, although the primary one, was not their only mission. Other intelligence of scientific interest was targeted, such as BW research, and indeed anything of a critical technical nature. A prime target for Pash was a Dr. Amaldi, an internationally known Italian scientist still residing in Rome, who, it was felt, could shed some light on German nuclear research. The OSS had failed to smuggle Amaldi out of occupied Rome. Pash tells the story. The associated problems and frustration are even today in reflection guaranteed to raise his blood pressure. Although Pash does credit OSS with many heroic exploits in World War II, their handling of Amaldi was not a particularly shining example. Pash and his force entered Rome on 5 June 1944 on the heels of forward combat elements. Their three targeted personalities, Drs. Amaldi, Georganni, and Weck, were soon reached. Laboratories and offices where information was available were gone over by the scientists. This relatively easy, although sometimes frustrating operation, was successful and produced some significant intelligence results. The major question of Nazi nuclear progress, however, was still not answered, and the real challenge still lay ahead. The Allies had just landed in Normandy and the path for Alsos was more clearly in sight.

After the completion of the Italian mission, Alsos had been officially established by order of Secretary Stimson, and with the new permanent assignment of scientists under Goudsmit, Alsos was ready for what lay ahead in France and Germany itself. The operation now took on formal organization and had direct liaison with the Pentagon through Major Howard J. Osborn.²

One of the first assignments for Alsos in France was to enter Paris at the first opportunity and sequester the world-famous nuclear physicist, Dr. Joliot-Curie, and his laboratory.

The details of how this was done are fascinating. It seems highly likely that only such an unorthodox individual as this "crazy Russian," as he was

²Now Director of Security, CIA.

described by some, could have accomplished this mission. He had not only to contend with the usual military rules and regulations of US Army bureaucracy, but with some restrictions from our Allies. The Free French, who had gained permission to enter Paris first, caused more problems than the diehard Nazis and French collaborators who remained in Paris. By devious means Alsos entered Paris ahead of the combat troops dodging sporadic rifle fire, and moved directly to Joliot's office, occupying his laboratory. Joliot-Curie, the top French nuclear physicist, was in the hands of Alsos.

Although a picture was beginning to be formed, the answer to the crucial question of the Nazi nuclear effort was elusive. The path now turned north toward Belgium. A refining plant of *Union Miniere Du Haut-Katanga*, the prime supplier of uranium ore, was located near Oolen, a small town northwest of Brussels. Alsos' mission was to get to Belgium without delay, determine where any stocks of refined uranium ore were located and in what amount, and seize any available supplies.

The Germans were still in the area. In actions worthy of some blood and thunder novel, braving rifle fire and mortar shells, Alsos reached its objective. Hastening in anticipation of a German counterattack, Pash and his men found 70 tons of refined uranium ore. Records indicated that the Germans had removed some 1,000 tons, and that the Belgians way back in 1940 had shipped more than 80 tons to France. This last bit of information resulted in a later chapter for Alsos.

The Alsos scientists now surmised that the next piece of the puzzle was to be found in Holland. The Phillips Works in Eindhoven, a large and modern electronics plant, was expected to yield specific documents relating to research activities at German research centers. Pash's assignment was to confiscate any such documents and to bring two of the top scientists from Phillips and Brussels. The corridor to Eindhoven had been opened by the US 101st Airborne Division the day Alsos moved in. Success was becoming almost routine.

The question of the missing uranium ore was the next order of business and a bit more complicated. The shipment had been traced by the Alsos CIC group to a warehouse in Toulouse. It had been sitting there since 1940 and nobody apparently knew what it was. The great obstacle confronting Alsos here, however, was the Free French. Pash couldn't quite accept the authenticity of some of these French "partisans" whom he described as coming out for the victory parades to "fight" when the fighting had already been done by others. He had apparently been sensitized to these fair weather patriots from his own bitter experiences in Russia in 1918-20. Author Pash does not, however, generalize against the French effort in World War II, and on the contrary expresses his appreciation for those who contributed. His mission to

Toulouse received such support and he describes with warmth and affection his association with French patriots, some of whom remain his friends to this day. The end result was again a success. He literally stole the barrels of processed uranium from under the noses of the French authorities who controlled the general area, and overcoming obstacles of US Army bureaucracy managed to ship it all to Marseilles via the "Red Ball Express" and eventually to the United States. Pash later learned that the Oolen shipment and the subsequent shipment found at Toulouse were eventually dropped on Hiroshima—"in somewhat altered form, to be sure."

The war was beginning to go very badly for the Nazis and Alsos began to pick up some of their targeted German scientists. A Nazi named Peterson who had been with the War Materials Office in Paris had been linked with some activity relating to thorium and had a connection with the over-all German atomic research picture. He was tracked down and captured in his secretary's home in Belgium. A priority list was drawn up on German scientists. Heading the list at that time was a Dr. Fleischmann, who handled German nuclear research in Strasbourg, Dr. C. F. von Weizsacker, a couple of other nuclear scientists, Dr. Von Haagen, the Nazi BW man, and finally several specialists in various other fields.

The targets fell like dominoes—first Fleischmann was taken in Strasbourg and eventually others on the list. The story of each one of these could serve as the basis for a Hollywood scenario. The picture of German nuclear research was beginning to take shape.

American armies were in Germany and organized German fighting was drawing to a close. Diehards who called themselves "Werewolves" had resolved to fight to the death and constituted a threat not only to Alsos personnel who were everywhere in Germany by that time but to some of the German scientists themselves. In addition the specter of the Red Army closing in from the East loomed even larger. The Soviets themselves had their own task forces trying to capture some of the elusive scientists and to "liberate their laboratories and their research." It thus became even more critical for Alsos to bring to a conclusion the mission it had began a year and a half earlier. Otto Hahn, one of the best known scientists, a Nobel prize winner in chemistry in 1944, was found in Tailfingen with his entire staff, followed by Drs. Gerlach and Diebner. With the exception of Dr. Werner Heisenberg, chief of the Nazi nuclear program, also a Nobel prize winner, Alsos had taken into custody every German scientist whose name appeared on the "wanted" list. The entire German atomic pile with all related equipment and documents were in American hands. General Eisenhower's radio to the Pentagon reported "Boris Pash has hit the jackpot." It added that the success of the entire operation exceeded the wildest hopes. The Alpine

Redoubt was the last big objective and the top German scientist Heisenberg was the target.

The capture of Heisenberg was inevitable. Alsos had become a well-oiled machine. Elements of an SS force totaling over seven hundred men surrendered to Pash and his small task force. The only casualty of that operation was the commander himself, Pash, not from "Werewolf" rifle or mortar fire but by an "enemy" mule who had been part of the German mountain division. It was an amusing although painful finale to the most exciting chapter of Alsos.

The remarkable story of Alsos is now history. There are other exciting incidents in the book too numerous to mention in this review, but certainly worthy of the reader's attention. The story was written by the man best qualified—the task force commander who helped create and who carried through the mission to fruition. The personality of Pash and the warm bond of affection that existed between him and his "Alsos boys" becomes quite evident to the reader. This bond is not a literary creation but did exist as it often did in small groups depending on each other for the success of their mission and often for their very lives. In my own personal experience when invited into Pash's home in the years since Alsos, I would inevitably hear that one of his "Alsos boys" had been by or he had just received a letter from one of them. This human trait of genuine affection, and esprit de corps was undoubtedly a major contributing factor of its success.

Alsos found that the worst of fears fortunately had not been realized. The Nazi research effort had not been ahead of the Manhattan Project primarily because of neglect of priority in the critical early years. Alsos had been successful in this final assessment and perhaps had its greatest triumph in depriving the Soviets of access to the German effort.

